

POSTURE: ALTERNATIVES TO THE PREVAILING PARADIGM PART 2: SENSORY AWARENESS & MOVEMENT MODALITIES

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- Thomas Hanna and Somatics
- Moshe Feldenkrais
- F.Mathias Alexander

THOMAS HANNA'S SOMATICS

Thomas Hanna (1928-1990) borrowed heavily from Hans Selyes, Moshe Feldenkrais and F.Mathias Alexander's research to develop a modality that sought to counteract the habitual state of forgetfulness called sensory-motor amnesia.

Hanna goes on to say in his book on Somatics, "It is a memory loss of how certain muscle groups feel and how to control them. And, because this occurs within the central nervous system, we are not aware of it, yet it affects us to our very core. The reflexes that cause sensory-motor amnesia are very specific. There are three...named Red light reflex, Green light reflex and Trauma reflex."



RED LIGHT REFLEX. (LEFT)

Essentially Red Light reflex is associated with the abdominal muscles and what Hanna termed the Withdrawal Response. It is associated with distressful events. It is a protective response to negative events that threaten us.

From head to toe, the Red Light reflex involves the following movements:

Closing the eyes, tensing the jaw and face, pulling forward of the neck, lifting of the shoulders, flexing the elbows, clenching the fists, flattening the chest, tightening abdominal muscle, contracting the diaphragm and holding the breath, contracting perineum including sphincters of the anus and urethra, contracting gluteus minimus muscles to rotate thighs inward, thus feet are pigeon toed, adduction of the thighs, contraction of the hamstrings to bend knees, flexing and supinating the feet. (Each foot lifts and inverts, tilting up the arch) the sensory feedback of all these movements constitutes the subjective feeling of the Red Light Reflex: Fear.

GREEN LIGHT REFLEX (RIGHT)

From head to toe, the green Light Reflex involves the following movements:

Opening the eyes, jaw and face, pulling backward of the neck, pulling downward of the shoulders, extending the elbows, opening of the hands, lifting the chest, lengthening the abdominal, relaxing the diaphragm and freeing breathing, relaxing anal and urethral sphincters in the perineum, contracting the gluteus medius muscle to rotate the thighs outward (feet are duck like), abduction of the thighs, contraction of the thigh extensors to straighten the knee to hyper-extension, extension and pronation of the feet. The sensory feedback of all these movements constitutes the subjective feeling of the Green Light Reflex-Effort.¹⁰



TRAUMA REFLEX

The trauma reflex according to Hanna is a reaction of the sensory-motor system in response to pain. It seemingly causes the body to tilt. Hanna viewed scoliosis, as a sideways twisting that was a result to some trauma that has occurred sometime in a person's life. Triggered by an injury, a fall, severe damage to the body, surgery, and whiplash all cause a protective pattern around the site of the injury.

Hanna went on to create a series of Somatic exercises whose primary task is to focus your attention on the internal sensations of movement. By paying attention, moving slowly and gently with the least possible effort, not forcing any movement, you can clear the brain to receive uncluttered sensory feedback, thus aiding in alleviating a variety of postural and somatic dysfunctions.¹¹

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD

The Feldenkrais method is a system that approaches human development and the improvement of functioning through physical movement and directed touch. How we learn and form habits is of central importance in the practice of the Feldenkrais method. Our posture and the ways that we move were learned, even if the learn is not conscious. Thus, physical difficulties or limitations are seen from this perspective, as the result of either incomplete learning or trauma that can lead to dysfunctional habit patterns. The Method utilizes functionally based variation, innovation, and differentiation in sensory motor activity to break down habitual patterns and allow new ways of thinking, feeling and action to emerge.¹²

Some quotes from Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), give a flavour of how posture is integrated in his approach.

“The way the mind and body are united has preoccupied human beings throughout the centuries. ‘A healthy mind in a healthy body’ and similar sayings show a conception of one kind of unity.

[...]

I believe that the unity of mind and body is an objective reality. They are not just parts somehow related to each other, but an inseparable whole while functioning. A brain without a body could not think; at least, the continuing of mental functions is assured by corresponding motor functions.

[...]

There is little doubt in my mind that the motor function, and perhaps the muscles themselves, is part and parcel of our higher functions. This is not true only of those higher functions like singing, painting and loving, which are impossible without muscular activity, but also of thinking, recalling, remembering and feeling.

The advantage of approaching the unity of mental and muscular life through the body lies in the fact that the muscle expression is simpler because it is concrete and easier to locate. It is also incomparably easier to make a person aware of what is happening in the body; therefore the body approach yields faster and more direct results. On acting on the significant parts of the body, such as the eyes, the neck, the breath, or the pelvis, it is easy to effect striking changes of mood on the spot.

[...]

A person is made up of three entities: the nervous system, which is the core; the body – skeleton, viscera and muscles; and the environment, which is space, gravitation, and society. These three aspects, each with its material support and its activity, together give a working picture of a human being.

[...]

Individually acquired action (ontogenic action) pertains to the senses. Such action can be altered or learned as one can become aware of the actual differences, such as the extent of the effort, its coordination in time, the body sensation, the spatial configuration of the body segments, the standing, the breathing, the wording, etc.

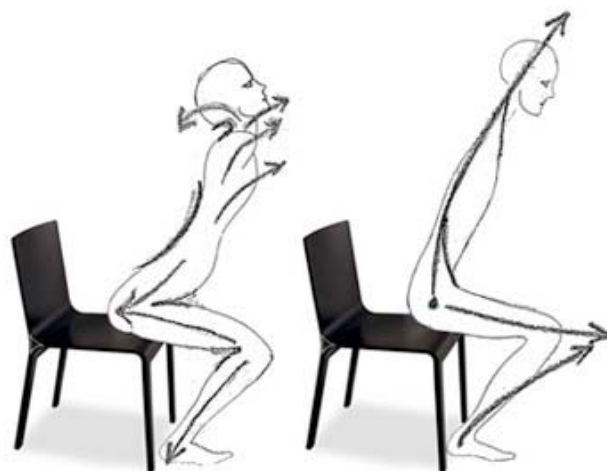
This kind of aware learning is complete when the new mode of action becomes automatic or even unconscious, as all habits do. The advantage of a habit acquired by awareness is that when it shows unfitness or maladjustment when confronted with reality, it easily provokes new awareness and so helps one to make a fresh and more efficient change.

My inmost belief is that, just as anatomy has helped us to get an intimate knowledge of the working of the body, and neuroanatomy an understanding of some activities of the psyche, so will understanding of the somatic aspects of consciousness enable us to know ourselves more intimately. ¹³.

POSTURE AND ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

It is a testament to the power of this method that it has endured the passage of time to still be extremely relevant and timely in a world out of touch with internal sensory awareness.

Born in Tasmania, F.M.Alexander (1869-1955) was a successful actor and reciter whose career was cut short by loss of voice during performances. With no help forthcoming from the medical profession, Alexander undertook an intensive examination of himself in action, convinced that the source of his voice problem lay in the way he used his body. A long period of research led him to discover certain principles affecting mind/body co-ordination applicable to every kind of physical activity. With this knowledge he went on to cure his own voice problem and found that he could also help others.



It was at this point that teaching his method became the main focus of his life.

Alexander arrived in England in 1904 and during the next 25 years built up a practice in London and the USA. He had many influential supporters among those were Sir Henry Irving, John Dewey, Aldous Huxley and Sir Stafford Cripps.

In 1931 he began training others to teach the Technique and continued to do so until his death at the age of 86. Today the importance of Alexander’s discoveries is confirmed by the existence of a rapidly growing body of teachers of his method.

QUOTATIONS:

You come to learn to inhibit and to direct your activity.

You learn, first, to inhibit the habitual reaction to certain classes of stimuli, and second, to direct yourself consciously in such a way as to affect certain muscular pulls, which processes bring about a new reaction to these stimuli.’

Boiled down, it all comes to inhibiting a particular reaction to a given stimulus.

But no one will see it that way. They will see it as getting in and out of a chair the right way. It is nothing of the kind. It is that a pupil decides what he will or will not consent to do. They may teach you anatomy and physiology till they are black in the face – you will still have this to face, sticking to a decision against the habit of life.

There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction.

You can’t do something you don’t know, if you keep on doing what you do know.

Trying is only emphasizing the thing we know already Sensory appreciation conditions conception – you can’t know a thing by an instrument that’s wrong.

To know when we are wrong is all that we shall ever know in this world.

You are not here to do exercises or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always put you wrong and to learn to deal with it. ¹⁴

HOW DOES THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE REDUCE STRESS?

F. M. Alexander identified the fact that most of us are in a perpetual state of “fight or flight syndrome”; also known as the startle response. If you have ever seen a newborn or young infant react to a loud, unexpected noise, you may recall their shoulders come up to their ears and their heads are pulled or fall back – they are clearly startled by the experience. In a few moments, as the event passes, they return to their prior state, which is relaxed, alert, and engaged.

As we grow up in our fast paced society, we face a constant onslaught of stressful events. We are in the process of recovery from one event when yet another stimulus hits our systems, and so we begin to function in a constant state of startle response. Because our nervous system adapts to the new level of stress, we cease to register it as too much and so never fully return to the easeful state of the newborn. Instead, we increase muscular effort throughout our lives. The analogy I use to describe this constant state of over-contraction is that of driving with the parking brake on. We use much more energy to perform simple activities than we actually need, which are a wasteful process.

F. M. Alexander’s recognition that his sensory feedback was unreliable gave him a window into changing his chronic overuse of muscle effort to a more efficient, appropriate level when accomplishing his activities. By learning to inhibit his startle response upon receiving stimulus, he was not only able to change muscle tension in his body; he was also able to change the biochemical messages being sent through his nervous system. What was once stressful when performed with the old habit patterns became easeful, poised and appropriate to the task at hand. This tool of inhibiting the old response is a skill that can be learned and enhanced with practice. This is how the Alexander Technique reduces psychophysical stress. ¹⁵

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Look out for “Part 3 – Gravitational Orientations” in the next issue.

Steven Goldstein resides in Melbourne, Australia, where he holds a Bachelor of Health Science in Musculoskeletal Therapy and Bachelor of Arts in Education. He is an innovative massage educator instructing his unique blend of direct myofascial, indirect osteopathic releasing methods and somatic approaches known as Integrative Fascial Release (IFR) internationally since 1995. www.fascialrelease.com

Steven Goldstein will be flying in from Australia in March to present a workshop on Integrative Fascial Release (IFR) in London. With IFR Steven has blended the global lines of myofascial tension (Myers) (Schleip) (Paoletti), with articular receptor facilitation to unwrap and unwind soft-tissue with little or no force. He has drawn from the work of Micheal Shea for Autonomic Nervous System approach and expression as the foundation of any soft-tissue work, and Craniosacral therapy to facilitate change to transverse planes; an excellent 3-day workshop jam-packed with hands-on! He will then be flying to Scotland to present a 2-day workshop on Fibromyalgia before returning to London for 3 more days covering Integrative Fascial Release Intermediate.